

BENEATH A MOUNTAIN  
& BENEATH THE WAVES,  
ONCE SEEN BY MORTALS  
A WORLD BE CHANGED

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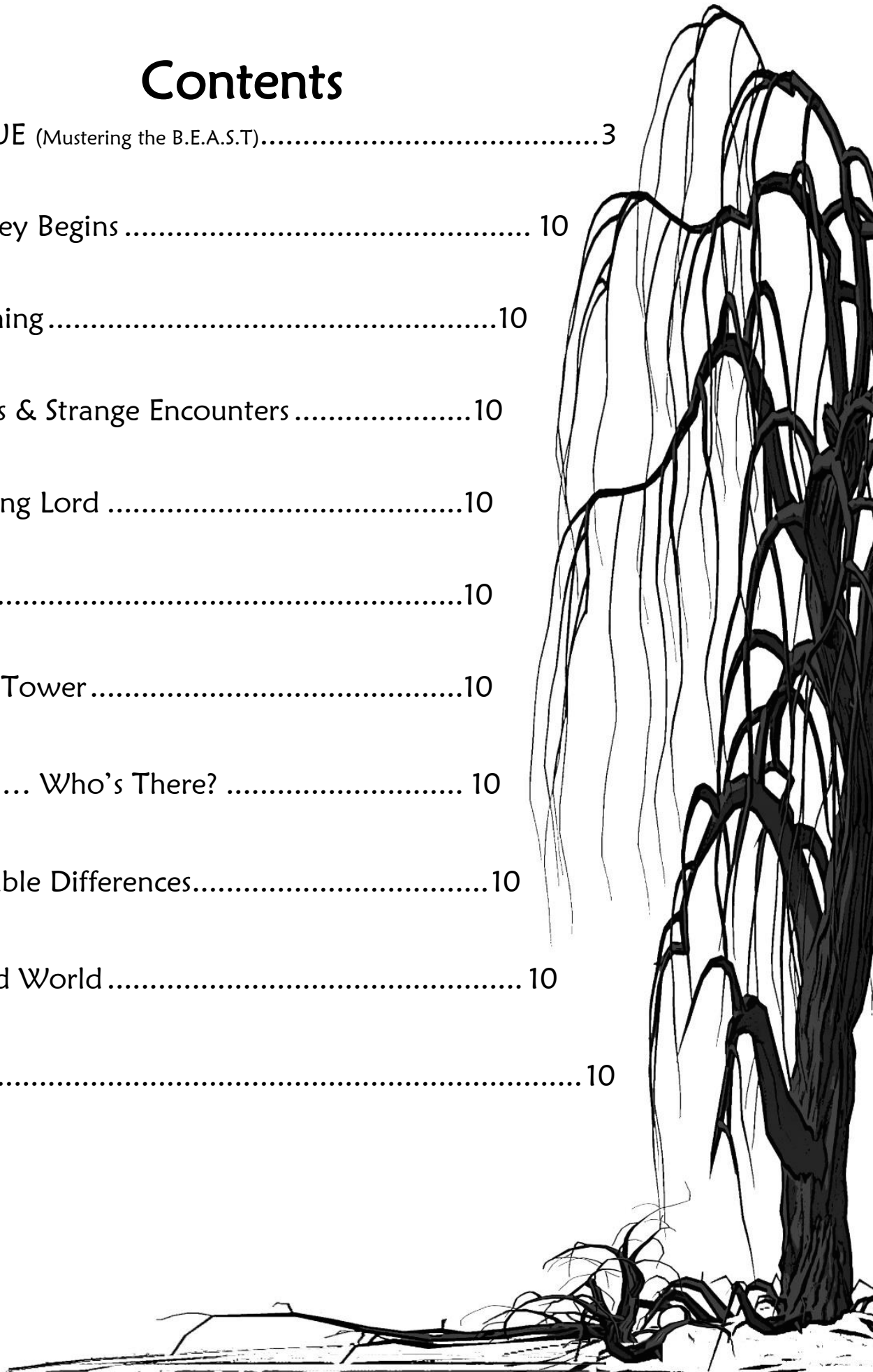
**B.E.A.S.T.:** Ss'arseth  
Ss'eth  
N'cindias  
Ni'Sal  
Ss'ers  
Scaled Wolf

**Priestess of the Fire Dragon**  
**Sentinel of the Blazing Wyrn**  
**Fire Elementalist**  
**Scout Sniper**  
**Templar of the Fire Dragon**  
**Disciple of Jeggal Sag**

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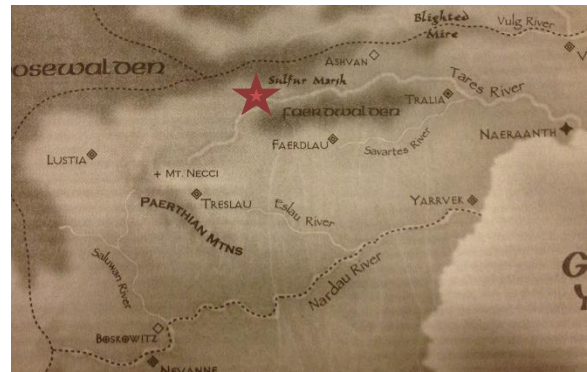




# PROLOGUE

Mustering the B.E.A.S.T.

Ss'arseth took her leave of the presiding Priestess, heading to one of the offering chambers within the temple. She had completed her report of BEAST's most recent travels, and now it was time to prepare for the next. This, however, would be much different from the normal travels that their team made.



She felt the pressure of her role every day; as a Priestess of the Fire Dragon, she was the one that her people looked to for leadership. While Ss'eth, the team's Sentinel of the Blazing Wyrn, was relied upon for his tactical and military leadership, it was her responsibility to provide the spiritual and overall leadership for the team. She was the representation of the Matriarch and the Clutch, and every decision she made had to fall in line with the Matriarch's direction and plan for their people.

This often caused her to clash with members of her team, especially The Scaled Wolf and the Ghost Scale, Ni'Sal. With the Ghost Scale, she brushed off his defiance because he was an outsider; he did not know their ways, did not know his place. But she could not understand the headstrong streak of The Scaled Wolf, and at their newest member, Ss'erss. If the team needed to find or follow tracks she would tell The Scaled Wolf to do so. He was the most skilled tracker of the team, so naturally she would draw upon each individual's strengths. But rather than obediently following her direction, The Scaled Wolf would go out of his way to make it clear that it was his choice to do the tracking and not hers.

She had been raised in the Temple, for as long as she remembered she was trained in the doctrine and teachings of the Fire Dragon. She was to be a beacon for her people, a bridge between The Blazing Wyrn and His chosen people. For years, she had observed the males of the clutch deferring to the Priestesses. Even as she progressed through the ranks in the Temple, she found that her guidance was valued and followed. However, once she left the Temple to aid their King in the Crusades, she learned how very different the world was, that not everyone revered a Priestess of the Fire Dragon the way her clutch did. The Scaled Wolf had been one of the first to teach her this lesson.

As she came to the offering stone, she presented a small bundle of twigs and skillfully set them ablaze. The warmth of the flame was immediate upon her scales, but

as she stood before the image of her Lord, she could feel it spread throughout her body and envelop her. As she so often did, she could feel the presence of the Fire Dragon wash over her and embrace her, like a caregiver to a hatchling. She focused herself on that presence, clearing her mind to allow His wisdom to flow through her.

“Great Fire Dragon, I ask for your strength and guidance as we embark upon this pilgrimage. Help me to guide my companions through this journey safely. Grant me your wisdom when the path is unclear, your perseverance in the face of our obstacles, and your patience...please, grant me your patience with the trying nature of The Scaled Wolf.” She paused a moment. “And your patience in all things, as you well know that my soul is an impatient one.”

She clasped her intricately carved holy symbol as she concluded her prayer. “Allow me to be a conduit for your will; let all I do be guided by your perfect hand. My life is yours.” She bowed her head in reverence, then took her leave while the small collection of tinder burned itself out. She turned to exit the Temple, filled with the reassurance that the Fire Dragon would be with them.


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There was a certain peace to the world in the moments before daybreak, before the diurnal creatures began to stir and fill the silence with the hum of life. The Scaled Wolf had been up a short time now, aiding his fellow Disciples in tending to the clutch’s Sc’maths. The members of BEAST were recently granted a set of Sc’maths to aid in their travels. However, the journey before them was a complete unknown. It could potentially require a great deal of stealth, not something a Sc’math was known for. Thus, BEAST had chosen to leave their new mounts in the capital under the care of the Disciples.

The Scaled Wolf gazed over the beasts, laying his clawed hands upon the neck of his Sc’math. He drew upon the natural energy of the world, radiating a sense of security and calm to the creatures. In response, he felt a gentle nudge upon his calf. She-Wolf had awoken and felt his soothing presence as well, and she greeted him with a slow wag of her tail. She and her pack had been his family since his hatching, her grandmother being the first to welcome the scaled hatchling to share her warmth with her pups.

It had been a bitterly cold winter, and the clutch faced continuous difficulties maintaining the warmth of the hatching fires. Many of the hatchlings were born with abnormalities and defects; some were considered to be potentially advantageous and were allowed to live, while others would have caused an undue burden on the clutch and needed to be culled. Born without a tail, The Scaled Wolf had been picked up by a young acolyte named Ss’arseth and was to be euthanized. But he possessed an inner fire and





will to live, and he bit down on the hand of his would be executioner. He fled the hatchery, out into the cold winter night on his own.

Whether the will of the Fire Dragon or the touch of guidance from Jeggal Sag, the small hatchling found his way to a nearby hut previously inhabited by the clutch's resident Disciple of Jeggal Sag. Within, a mother wolf had taken shelter and given birth to her own litter of pups. The Scaled Wolf had crept carefully up to the pile of warmth and fur, snuggling up and finding sanctuary from the cold. The mother wolf accepted him, as well as an elderly Disciple that tracked down the errant hatchling. This Disciple took it upon himself to care for and train the hatchling in the teachings of Jeggal Sag.

He was told of his hatching and the sparing of his life by the compassion of the High Matriarch Mother. Compassion, he truly understood it and still does today. Although all those of his clutch who have

survived the ravages of life in the swamps have a deeper understanding of the concept than most, he feels that his understanding is deeper still. Through his training, he has learned to shift into the form of a wolf, to run with the pack. Unlike most of the Ssethric races, he knows what it is like to be warm blooded, to feel the warmth of emotions and feelings towards other beings of this world. Both cold blooded and warm blooded hearts have their advantages and he knows what it is to have felt both beating within his chest. The creatures of the forest understood this concept, compassion, without hesitation and with such passion that they were willing to forfeit their lives to protect their Lord from an avenging Valinor. So much passion that it drove other Valinor to intercede and direct the one to put away his arms and leave the fallen Lord of Beasts where he lay in slumber.

It was to his place of eternal slumber that The Scaled Wolf now must go to pay his respects and to thank his Lord, Jeggal Sag, for giving unto him an understanding of things so few beings ever have the beauty of knowing. To walk the lines between so many worlds, reptilian, mammalian, avian, aquatic, and even the realm of spirits, is truly a gift beyond gifts.

The Scaled Wolf gathered his belongings for the journey with She-Wolf steadfast at his heels. Daylight was beginning to spill over the horizon, signaling all of his companions to gather at the Temple of the Fire Dragon before departing for the Ssethregoran lands to the south.

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N'cindias glanced at the brightening sky, letting out a brief sigh as she closed one of many books upon the table. She had been spending time poring over history and geography books of the Ssethregoran Empire in preparation for their upcoming journey.

While nearly all Ss'ressen knew the major points of their history and exodus from



the Empire, N'cindias felt it was prudent to brush up on her knowledge to prepare herself as best she could, and Ss'arseth would naturally expect her to know such things.

N'cindias mildly rolled her eyes at that thought; Ss'arseth expected a lot. When anything of an academic nature was needed, it was simply expected that N'cindias would know. For the natural world, Ss'arseth expected The Scaled Wolf to have all the answers. There were times it was exasperating, but it certainly was a way to ensure the team kept their skills sharp.

Once the books had been returned to their rightful place, she opened her traveling pack to review its contents. She counted the rations within, lamenting the fact that she was limited on space and weight. She always purchased the most high quality rations, among other things. Her time at the Sanctorum taught her to appreciate the finer things in life that you did not have to sacrifice quality and taste just because you traveled. Unfortunately, the length of their trip and the inability to refresh the rations once they entered the Empire meant she would have to eat whatever the land provided. Oh, the sacrifices she made...

N'cindias made her way to the Temple, catching sight of the flames marking the entrance. She stared at the flames, entranced; she had always been enthralled by the element of fire. The flames flickered and danced hypnotically, and she could feel the power and grace of them. So beautiful and yet so destructive, a raging inferno waiting just below the surface.

Although she had studied many forms of Eldritch magic with the Sanctorum, none had been as captivating as elemental magic. She had dedicated her studies to the elements, and part of her history research earlier included how the Ssethregorans had once summoned Elementals to fight the Il'Huan. Why had that ability been lost, why could she not call upon the beings of the Elemental Planes?

Perhaps, someday, she would find a way. But for now, it was time to leave the safety and comfort of the Sulfur Marsh for the wild and unknown lands of Ssethregore.

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Ss'eth made one final check of his bearded axe, hefting it easily in one huge hand. Most Ss'ressen warriors wielded a bearded axe, but very few were able to wield one in each hand. Though hatched from one of the tiniest eggs of that hatching, he had slowly but steadily grown taller and stronger. The only thing that remained of his once displeasing physical form was his left eye. Or rather, the scaled over area of his head where his left eye should have been. The birth defect had not impaired his ability to excel in martial combat, nor pursue the dedicated path as a Sentinel of the Blazing Wyrms.





As he left the Temple's armory, he caught sight of Ss'arseth, deep in prayer. He paused, reflecting on the day he first met the Priestess during one of the many battles of the Crusade. The battle was raging around him, separating him from his companions. Through blood and blades of war, Ss'eth moved through his foes like a leaf on the wind. Even now, he could remember the feel of fire burning through his chest, white hot, pulling him forward. Suddenly, for a fraction of a moment, all went silent as time seemed to stop. In the void, he heard the voice of the Blazing Wyrms for the first time.

"YOU ARE NEEDED."

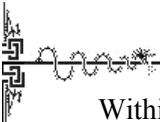
At once his senses returned to the battle at hand. With a roar, he crashed through the combatants in front of him to find a Priestess of the Fire Dragon, fighting with the same passion that he felt within his scales. It was a surprise to see a Priestess out, so far from the Marsh, and engaged in such a conflict. Ss'eth took up a position by her side, and together they tore through their enemies. After the battle, he knew that the Fire Dragon had led him to her for a reason. She would be important for their people, and he would protect her. It was the Fire Dragon's will.

Unfortunately, she did not always see things that way. There was an ever present conflict between them; Ss'arseth believed that she needed to be out in the world, gathering experience and knowledge in order to lead the Clutch in the best way she could. She also knew the blessings the Fire Dragon had given her, strengthening her scales to resist injury far better than the average Ss'ressen. Thus, she would not back down from a fight. In fact, despite Ss'eth's numerous protestations, she would often step forward to take on the attacks of their foes to protect the Elementalist N'cindias. After battle, when she was winded and bleeding, Ss'eth would scold her. "You are important to the future of our people! I can't have you just throwing your life away." It mattered not; she was stubborn and had reasons for everything she did. All Ss'eth could do was remain steadfast at her side, trusting in the Fire Dragon to aid him in protecting her.

As always, he took up position beside her. He was an intimidating form, towering above her and gazing at her with his single eye. He could feel the divine presence lingering on her as she greeted him. "The Fire Dragon is with us on this journey, as He always is. Let me share His blessing with you."

Ss'arseth clasped his hands within hers as best she could. As she invoked the prayer, he could feel the divine magic surge between them. "Fire Dragon, I ask for your Blessing upon your devout follower, Ss'eth. By your grace, we do swear to protect this pilgrimage until we reach the Mound of Jeggal Sag."

Ss'eth solidified his pledge. "Unto my dying breath, this I swear."



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Within the barracks of the temple, Ss'erss collected his arms and armor. He had checked and double checked them the night before, ensuring they were in top condition. He was the youngest of the team, a Templar in the service of the Fire Dragon. His first duties outside the clutch were fighting in the Crusades, before he met with BEAST.

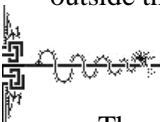
Fighting alongside the Milandisians, he learned much about life outside the Marsh. Human society was very different from Ss'ressen; while the fighting ranks of the humans were filled with the males (like Ss'ressen), he found they additionally held most of the positions of power outside the military as well. The males could hold any position they chose, rather than being relegated to manual labor and martial training. And in complete contrast to Ss'ressen society, the males were the dominant leaders within their religious structure. Females supported the churches as well, but males held the majority of the high ranking positions.

This exposure had made Ss'erss look at Ss'ressen society with a critical eye. Why shouldn't the males be able to pursue the path of Priesthood if they felt the calling? Why must they be relegated to only serving their Fiery Lord in a combat role? More and more, Ss'erss began to feel that all Ss'ressen should be equal, should be able to pursue whatever path they chose in life. Not be bounded by tradition or outdated gender restrictions. What would be best for the clutch, what would make it stronger, would be for the most qualified individual to hold a given position, whether male or female.

Convincing the females that this was the way of the future, however, would not be an easy task. He already had enough trouble with Ss'arseth, believing he and Ss'eth should simply fall into step because she declared it so. She believed in her superiority, and the centuries upon centuries of matriarchal rule. Trying to convince her that all Ss'ressen should be equal would be a daunting task, but even her close-minded views would not sway Ss'erss from the possibilities that the Milandisian way of life had shown him.

Ss'erss finalized his checklist, hoisting his traveling pack onto his shoulders. Despite their differences in opinions, BEAST was good. Ss'erss was proud to be a part of the team, and recognized the devotion the members had to each other. The pilgrimage they were all about to embark on was one that only The Scaled Wolf had to complete, but the entire team was accompanying him. It was important to him, and thus it was important to them all.

Ss'erss exited the barracks, feeling a surge of anticipation as he saw the others gathered outside the Temple. None knew what was to come, but they would face it together.



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The warm air came off the hot springs of the Sulfur Marsh, gently blowing through the tree where Ni'Sal sat. To the average passerby, there would be no indication





of the Ghost Scale lying in wait above them. His scales blended perfectly into the trunk and leaves, but even without these natural abilities, he was a master at going unnoticed.

He watched as his companions congregated outside the Temple. This was the vantage point he loved the most; being above friends and foes alike, to take in the entirety of a situation and pick out things that others may not see. It gave him an obvious tactical edge, and he took advantage of it whenever he could. It also aided him defensively, as his scales were not as hardened and tough as his Black Talon fellows.

A Ghost Scale amid the Black Talons...he mused over the turns his life had taken. He met BEAST years ago, when he was acting as but a mercenary. They took note of his skills with a bow, and his stealthy nature, and recruited him for some of their travels. Through that time together, Ni'Sal saw the strength of their camaraderie, and it was infectious. He found himself drawn into their bonds of friendship, how they worked together and would protect each other unto death.

In time, Ni'Sal had also come to know the Fire Dragon in ways he had never known as a Ghost Scale. He abandoned the worship of Herka, making him a heretic to his own people. He relinquished his ties to Coryan, the Ghost Scale, or the worship of Herka, and joined BEAST in the Marsh permanently.

That did not mean that Ni'Sal was quite as fervent as the Black Talon in their dedication to Milandir and the clutch. These concepts meant little to him; he cared not who was King or the status of the Black Talon within Milandir. However, these things were of critical importance to his comrades, and this made it important to Ni'Sal. If they would fight and die for Milandir and the Clutch, then Ni'Sal would fight and die right alongside them. If something happened to them all, however, it was back to mercenary work.

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All had gathered outside the Temple, leaving Ni'Sal the last to join them. He lightly descended from the tree before them, shifting his scales to a bright pink as he landed. "Well, now that we're all here, shall we get this show on the road?"

"You are the leader of this expedition," Ss'arseth stated plainly, addressing The Scaled Wolf. The words seemed to be difficult for her to muster.

"For once, I am relinquishing my leadership to you."